

Abstract

Medium-sized cities across Europe are increasingly and actively attracting skilled migrants. How can stakeholders in these cities best manage the challenges of internationalization? The authors combine academic findings with policy reflections to provide a uniquely interdisciplinary guide for academics, policy makers, and professionals in local governments, universities, human resource management departments, for successfully coordinating international talent management.

Cities for Talent: Medium-Sized European Cities Are Becoming More International

Willem van Winden and Marian Counihan

In the past decades, European medium-sized cities have become active attractors of skilled migrants. Universities have been the prime drivers, luring international students both from EU and non-EU countries benefitting from growing international student demand. Moreover, European economic integration has caused a growing influx of international professionals (expats, independent workers) in these cities. Universities and urban policy makers have come to hail skilled internationalization as a way to boost revenues, increase diversity and cosmopolitanism (“we are not a provincial city”), or as a way to counter the trend of a declining home market due to an aging population.

This article dives deeper into the internationalization wave in medium-sized cities as they are playing out across Europe today, combining analytical contributions with policy perspectives and good practices from a number of European cities.

Skilled Migration into Medium-Sized Cities

Skilled migration processes play out differently in different types of cities. Highly ranked university cities, such as Heidelberg, Leuven, Lund, or Oxford have developed internationally oriented knowledge-based economies around their universities, with start-up ecosystems and science-based businesses. They attract not only international students but also large numbers of scientists and knowledge workers from abroad. By contrast, cities in Central Europe, such as Debrecen or Timisoara, have seen a large influx of foreign direct investment from European and Asian multinationals. Rather than large numbers of international students, they attract medium- and highly skilled engineers to build and run the factories.

Each medium-sized city has its own mix of factors that produces a unique skilled migration picture, but they share some common challenges. Unlike capitals or international hubs, medium-sized cities do not have large international labor markets, making it harder for skilled migrants (and their partners!) to plan a career, leading to lower retention rates. These cities also lack the variety of migrant and expat organizations that may help provide a soft landing for migrants; moreover, city services are less prepared to cater for a more diverse clientele, and compared to larger cities with a long history of immigration, host societies of smaller cities tend to be less receptive to migrants.

How Cities and Their Stakeholders Deal with Skilled Migrants

Five key themes elaborate on a specific aspect of skilled migration and related policies.

- City branding: Cities and universities tend to position themselves as attractive, international, and outward-looking places for international talent, following a logic of

competition for the best brains. But these shiny marketing campaigns do not always resonate with the everyday experience of students and residents. How can cities brand themselves well? And how can stakeholders collaborate effectively?

- ▶ Sociocultural integration: Skilled migrants are flocking to medium-sized cities in growing numbers and for various reasons. But after they have arrived, how do they integrate into the local community (if at all), what barriers do they face, what conflicts arise, and what policies do cities put in place to increase integration and avoid the emergence of parallel societies?
- ▶ Internationalization in higher education: In most medium-sized cities, the university is the largest driver of internationalization. Universities have always been internationally oriented, but over the past decades, they have attracted steeply growing numbers of international (both exchange and degree-seeking) students and staff, and they have internationalized their curricula. What drives this trend, and how do stakeholders collaborate?
- ▶ Labor market integration: The integration of international students and other skilled migrants into urban labor markets comes with its challenges, especially in medium-sized cities, which do not have a long history of skilled migration. International student retention rates tend to be low. Many small and medium enterprises have difficulty adapting to a multilingual and multicultural workforce. And career trajectories do not always work out as planned; deskilling is endemic. Moreover, remote working in a (post) COVID-19 world is changing workplace practices, with possibly far-reaching implications.
- ▶ Urban governance: Urban stakeholders face the challenge of how to coordinate their actions to attract and/or incorporate skilled international migrants in the city, addressing the challenges outlined above. In our book *Cities for talent: Good practices for internationalisation in medium-sized European cities*, various models of “coordinated international talent management” are identified, based on practices in European cities.

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Some Key Findings on International Higher Education

First, in most cities, policies to attract international students and other skilled migrants are scantily evidence based and fail to define specific target groups or track how their international population fare in the city. Online communities contain a wealth of first-hand qualitative information on how skilled migrants feel, how they appreciate the city, and what their problems and challenges are, but city and university administrations are slow to use these free sources of rich qualitative data to inform their policies or to actively engage with students and other skilled migrants on these issues. Effective coordinated talent management is needed, which should include the collection of intelligence about the well-being of skilled migrants in the city and region.

Second, internationalization is not just about facilitating the everyday life of international students and other skilled migrants. It implies a shift in orientation for a city as a whole, including local institutions, organizations, and residents. It will have impacts that are broadly felt and need to be managed actively. This applies to local organizations, which need to be equipped to provide services to a wider range of residents. Some cities, exemplified by Groningen or Leuven, have taken a more strategic and collaborative approach. Such approaches require solid and long-term funding and capacity building, rather than one-off projects here and there. Moreover, cities are wise to codevelop an integrated vision on internationalization that goes beyond migration, taking not only local but also regional, national, and supranational levels into account.

Finally, internationalization in higher education could fruitfully bring cities and universities together around major societal challenges. Some European university alliances are leading the way, developing programs in which students work on societal challenges with urban stakeholders in different urban contexts, leading to a rich learning and exchange experience for the students as well as valuable policy input for cities. ▲

Willem van Winden is professor of urban economic innovation, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands. Email: w.van.winden@hva.nl.

Marian Counihan is philosopher of urban and migration studies and a lecturer at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Email: m.e.counihan@rug.nl.

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